

Proper 17B

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### Giving Thanks for the Empty Spaces in Scripture

While on retreat, I participated in a workshop led by a Jewish Rabbi who teaches at a Rabbinical School, actually not far from here. Rabbi Friedman taught on the Jewish tradition of Midrash, that is the Jewish approach in investigating the deeper meaning of scripture. She had those of us attending the workshop use the techniques and tools of Jewish Midrash to explore the sacred stories of our own lives. It was an enlightening exercise. One thing she said about the Jewish understanding of scripture was especially intriguing: “The empty space between the words and the lines of scripture have something valuable to teach us.” She went on to explain that even what is absent from a passage or a story, what is not explicitly told or written down, can hold meaning for us. This understanding is so different from the literalist lens through which many Christians are taught to approach scripture. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, the subtleties and nuances of the language and words, even what is left out of a story, can give insight into God’s holy message.

As I was grappling with our Gospel passage for today, the final bread of life discourse from John’s 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, I was struck by the empty spaces between the words and lines of this story. The scene takes place in the synagogue at Capernaum where Jesus had taught many times before and where his teachings were not often warmly received. He continues to repeat that those who eat

his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life. Many of his hearers can't take it anymore. This Rabbi's teaching is too difficult to accept. Jesus pushes back, challenging those still listening with more potentially offensive words until many who had followed him up to this point decide to walk away from him and from the promise of new life. They were all for being fed by the Rabbi with the loaves and fish when they were starving, but what he is saying now is too much. The way of discipleship is not what they signed up for. It's too demanding.

I imagine that this must have been a painful moment in Jesus' ministry. He had been healing and teaching and feeding desperate people. Time and again he was putting himself out there for complete strangers. "In my own flesh and blood I give myself over to you so that you may have life," he said to the crowd, to his opponents and to his followers. And how do these listeners respond to his words? Many abandon him. They turn back and no longer follow him—a moment of great vulnerability for the Son of God. In the question posed to his closest friends, we hear a hint of this vulnerability and doubt.

"Do you also wish to go away," he says. We can easily miss out on the subtlety of these words, the empty space between them which give us insight into the person of Jesus. Throughout his Gospel account John focuses on Jesus' divinity: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus was on a divine mission. He knew his role and his purpose and nothing would get in his way. John leaves little room for doubt and vulnerability in our experience of Jesus. And yet, in this one question we glimpse Jesus the man reaching out to his friends for reassurance. "Do you also wish to go away like all the rest?"

If we are honest with ourselves, like John we are uncomfortable with imagining a vulnerable and doubting Jesus. We want Jesus to know everything and to be

in control all of the time. We like to think of Jesus as Superman swooping in to save the day. Unfortunately or fortunately, that is not the Jesus we get. The Incarnation teaches us that God becomes flesh in Jesus and everything that goes along with being flesh: frailty, doubt, vulnerability, brokenness and all. The bread of life which came down from heaven is broken for the world. "This is my body broken for you." "This is my blood shed for you", we hear as we gather around God's table. In the Eucharist we invite not Jesus the Superman, but vulnerable, broken, and doubting Jesus to come among us. In him and only him, do we experience the promise of new life.

Lizzie, a vestry member at my former parish, began her lay stewardship sermon by telling the congregation of her very first visit to St. Stephen's. Lizzie was unchurched and her husband was a lapsed Roman Catholic who had just recovered from a life threatening illness. Both Lizzie and John felt they needed to find a community of faith in which to express their gratitude for John's amazing recovery. Through friends they heard that St. Stephen's was a welcoming community and so they decided to go see for themselves. The first Sunday service they happened to attend was the one in which the congregation was welcoming back their Assistant Rector. She had been away for months sitting at the bedside of her teenage daughter who was fighting a losing battle with cancer. This was the priest's first time in the pulpit since her daughter's death. Lizzie told us that in this woman's sermon she shared those last precious months with her daughter: both the agony and grief-stricken moments, as well as the grace and joy-filled ones. At the end of her sermon, with remarkable honesty, the priest looked out at her congregation and said, "I don't know if I believe in God right now; but I do know that I believe in my daughter and the power of her love." Lizzie thought that if a priest could get up in the pulpit and with such courage share her brokenness and her doubt

with her people, then this was the community to which she must belong.

Rarely have I heard of a priest being able to share such vulnerability with her people. I must admit that I'm not sure I would have had the guts to do what that Assistant Rector did. It would have been too scary for me to be that vulnerable. Friends, I believe that there is a piece in all of us, at least I know there is a piece in me that clings for dear life to the illusion of being in control all of the time, that wouldn't dare think of exposing such doubt or vulnerability. There is a piece in each of us that works overtime at maintaining that Superman or Wonder Woman facade.

And yet, I do know that Lizzie and many other parishioners who were sitting in the pews that morning were profoundly changed by the priest's ability to share her broken heart with them. Jesus came among us in the flesh so that we would not have to be afraid any longer, so that we would not need to cling for dear life to those things which suck the very life out of us. Jesus came among us in the flesh as a real human being, not as Superman, so that we would not have to strive in vain at maintaining that Superman or Wonder Woman status. Jesus came among us in the flesh, body broken and blood poured out for us so that we may also be broken and poured out for one another, allowing our own vulnerability and doubt to become a gift to others on the journey.

I give thanks for the empty spaces between the words and lines of scripture which reveal to us this day, the doubting and vulnerable Jesus. In him we are able to embrace the gift of our humanity and in turn be drawn ever deeper into the fullness of an incarnational life lived in God.